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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses standards-based reform in the Boston Public Schools, exploring the importance of creating a sensible and interdependent relationship between general and special education. Section 1 discusses education reform and special education. Section 2 examines organizational changes to support reform. Section 3 describes conceptual changes to support reform (special education has been viewed as the only service available, resulting in a lack of emphasis and coordination of service options for students without disabilities, and tighter alignment was needed between district and whole-school improvement planning). Section 4 highlights the scope of the United Student Services Team's work (guiding principles, structure and leadership, defining the work, and strategic action). Section 5 presents lessons learned, including the need to: make sure that special education is working well when a unified model is launched; discuss the reorganization with all stakeholders; and make explicit connections between resources and unified support to schools. Section 6 examines future challenges, including more closely aligning services with the needs of students, teachers, and other partners and developing formative evaluations so that progress can be gauged through indicators that show students' progress and provide teachers with data to reflect on their own practices. (SM)

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The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education, funds the National Institute for Urban School Improvement to facilitate the unification of current general and special education reform efforts as these are implemented in the nation's urban school districts. The National Institute's creation reflects OSEP's long-standing commitment to improving educational outcomes for all children, specifically those with disabilities, in communities challenged and enriched by the urban experience.

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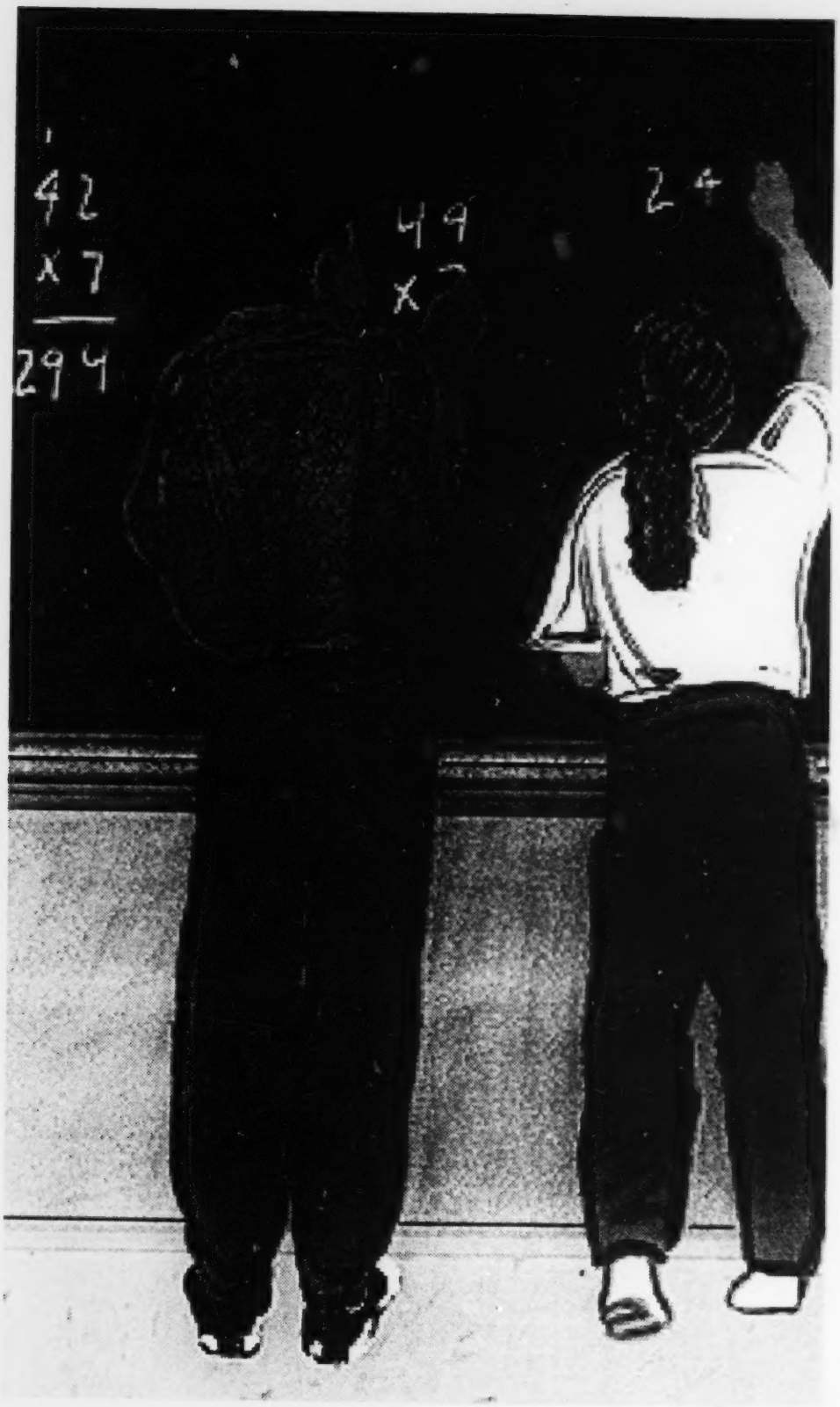

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Unified Student Services in Boston Public Schools: Building a Continuum of Services through Standards-Based Reform

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Education Reform and Special Education

Standards-based reform has deepened the urgency for urban school districts to show results and outcomes for all students. Successful standards-based reform requires 1) establishing clear expectations for what all students should learn, 2) creating curriculum that provides access to quality content and materials, 3) designing professional development to help teachers improve their instructional practice, and 4) developing assessments which enable students to demonstrate what they have learned and how to apply this learning. These four elements are the mileposts on the standards-based reform journey. When the elements of standards-based reform are aligned, the opportunities for success are high. As standards-based reform shifts the focus to increased achievement for all, the passage of IDEA-97 represents an equally significant sea of change for special education. While still preserving due process rights and procedures for students with disabilities and the regulatory processes governing entry and placement into special education, accountability for results from special education has also become a salient mandate.

This paper tells the unfinished journey of standards-based reform in the Boston Public Schools. It explores the importance of creating a sensible and interdependent relationship between general and special education and illustrates how the strength of working together can impact the power of a large school district to truly serve all students.

Five issues are clear as Boston grapples with these challenges. First, special education reform can only occur within the context of general education reform. Given the numbers of students with disabilities within large urban school districts, many of whom have not received appropriate instruction within general education, standards-based reform efforts must include and consider the needs of students with disabilities. As a result of IDEA-97, students with disabilities now participate in all district assessment plans and testing scores of students with disabilities are now included in districts' accountability measures.

Access to the general education curriculum is now the cornerstone of the federal law to ensure equity and opportunity so that students with disabilities will be able to learn what they need to know to perform well on accountability measures. The historical trend of removing students with disabilities from general education to separate special education placements must change to provide these students with the opportunities standards-based reform promises. Teachers and providers now must align special education instruction and classroom supports closely with the district's teaching and learning agenda so that outcomes can be measured and realized for students with disabilities.

Second, it is critical to view special education services along a continuum, which will enable educators to meet the needs of students and support improved student achievement.

Third, with the increase of violence in society at large, schools have experienced increases as well. Unacceptable behavior may be correlated with students' feelings of increased disconnection and isolation from the adults in their lives at home and in school. Therefore, services to "connect" students to their learning and growth become critical to school safety, as well as student achievement (Buchman, 1999).

Fourth, schools have realized that reform efforts must be evaluated by using multiple measures to assess progress defined as value-added for students from September to September. Success measured solely through single year-end test scores is not enough to demonstrate the progress students are making during the school year. Reliance on standardized test scores alone may actually contribute to students' feelings of isolation and decrease individual effort toward reaching high-stake goals, particularly if they do not have the opportunity to learn what will be tested. For students with disabilities, this issue becomes even more important, as individual progress gained and measured is now a cornerstone of the IDEA and must be embodied in each student's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP).

Finally, given the number of challenges and opportunities all students—both students with and without disabilities—bring to the urban classroom door, schools must have a systemic approach to address those challenges which contribute to barriers to effective learning and success in clearing the high standards bar. Such systemic approaches, now beginning to be reviewed in the literature (Elmore, in press) have the potential of adding significant power to standard-based reform efforts and generating improved results for all students.

Schools realize that they alone cannot address the range of needs that students have. Full-service schools, models of collaborative practice among different service providers, and partnerships between schools and outside agencies have become more prevalent and have shown some positive impact on student learning. Full-service schools integrate all resources both internal and external to the school to serve a wide array of student and family needs (Dryfoos, 1994). Effective collaboration among nurses, psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors and other mental health professionals leads to more effective, coordinated support for students and families. Partnerships with external agencies can enhance school services by providing students and families access to services beyond the school day. Though this work is reported as important at individual school sites, few large urban school

districts using whole system approaches are aligning their efforts in the support services area as a vehicle for reform.

Organizational Changes to Support Reform

In 1996, Boston Public Schools (BPS) embarked on a broad and bold mission of standards-based reform. The Superintendent developed and the School Committee adopted as its five-year reform plan. It established one primary goal and three ancillary goals to improve all 128 schools in Boston.

> Primary Goal: Improve teaching and learning to enable all students to achieve high standards of performance.
>
> Goal 2: Change the structure of the Boston Public Schools to focus on student performance and to serve the community.
>
> Goal 3: Provide safe, nurturing, healthy schools where students receive the support they need to succeed in school.
>
> Goal 4: Engage parents and the community in school improvement through a unified, collaborative structure and effective communication.

Each school developed a comprehensive school plan to address these goals. The Superintendent urged schools to think about ways to connect the various elements of the plan: learning goals for students, curriculum, instructional practice, professional development for teachers, student support services, parent involvement, partnerships, and assessment. With these elements aligned to improve teaching and learning for all students, the intent is for the whole plan to become greater than the sum of its parts.

In 1998, the Special Education Department was reorganized to directly reflect the district plan and to better emphasize the teaching and learning agenda. A year later, the decision was made to combine the separate departments of special education and support services into a new team which would provide a full continuum of support services for students with and without disabilities. Prior to this change, the Special Education Department focused solely on the nearly 14,000 students identified through the special education evaluation process. The Student Support Services Department included all other services, such as guidance, health, counseling, alternative education, and adult education, as well as many initiatives funded through external sources. Such grants supported a number of different independent initiatives without a common focus to support teaching and learning. The work lacked alignment with district goals, was bifurcated from the teaching and learning agenda, and created confusion in the schools because there were many different staff members involved whose efforts were rarely evaluated. The Unified Student Services Team was created to bring the disconnected projects and services together to improve central support for students, families, and staff.

Conceptual Changes to Support Reform

The rationale for the organizational changes was based on fundamental concepts that shaped the work of the new Unified Student Services Team.

1. Special education had been viewed as "the only service available" resulting in a lack of emphasis and coordination of service options for students without disabilities.

In Boston, the number of students with disabilities, for many years, had far exceeded the average percentage in most cities. In 1998, twenty-two percent (22 percent) of its nearly 64,000 students were receiving special education services, while most cities across the country serve an average of 12–14 percent. Reasons for such disproportionality are many. A primary issue has been the Massachusetts standard for special education, "maximum feasible benefit," which exceeds the free and appropriate public education (FAPE) federal guideline within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The Massachusetts standard establishes a baseline of service for a student with a disability that exceeds the equity standard, which is evident in the other 49 states. Though most states strive to establish accessible and equitable services for students with disabilities, Massachusetts has set the standard for students with disabilities to receive services that non-disabled students receive to ensure "maximal feasible benefit."

While the intent of the federal law was to develop a "level playing field" between students with and without disabilities, the Massachusetts standard had built a "bigger and better playing field." "Maximum feasible benefit" connoted a higher level of service for students with disabilities and, though perhaps not intentional, attracted more referrals to special education. Coupled with state regulations having minimal and weak criteria for eligibility for designation of a disability, special education in Massachusetts is often seen as the only alternative to acquire services for students who may not have a disability, but who may be underachieving. Although this has never been the intent of IDEA, it is clear that many non-disabled students have been referred to special education because of inappropriate instruction within general education classrooms. These regulatory issues have resulted in a significant proportion of students receiving special education services who do not have disabilities, but who may have special needs. During 2000, the state legislature, after much debate, voted to change the Massachusetts standard to the federal free and appropriate public education standard (FAPE).

Related to the above, another reason for such a high number of students with disabilities within Boston has been the historical lack of a systemically focused literacy plan to guide whole school change efforts. This led to a large numbers of referrals to special education. Referrals were deemed necessary, because it was "the only means to get services" and to improve student achievement in reading and math. Currently, nearly 70 percent of Boston referrals made to special education are from general education and are related to the lack of reading progress and/or demonstration of inappropriate behavior in the general education setting. Most frequently, a combination of both reading problems and behavior issues lead to referrals. For

many years, special education was viewed as the only service available to assist these students, resulting in overidentifying many students in need of specialized instruction, when the real need was for effective literacy and classroom management practices in both general and special education. In 1999, special education was unified with other support services because of the belief that students demonstrating such needs would have the opportunity to receive support services while students with disabilities, entitled by law, would continue to receive appropriate special education services, with increasing numbers in less restrictive general education classrooms with appropriate instructional and/or behavioral supports.

2. Effective models of practice for all non classroom-based support staff was needed to lead to results.

A second reason for the change was to identify those models of service, which would lead to stronger accountability for achieving teaching and learning goals. The Boston School Committee passed a strict policy in the spring of 1999 to end social promotion practices and ensure students would achieve specific benchmarks at key grades. The school district committed more than $20 million to start a 15-month transition program for those students not meeting the standards outcomes in grades three, six, and nine. It began with a summer program in 1999 and was followed by an academic year with double blocks of literacy and math provided by specialists, formative assessments administered three times during the year to mark student progress, extended day periods two days per week, and a second summer of targeted support in 2000. It became clear that in order to help accelerate progress for these students, a more concerted effort, encompassing all support services was needed.

3. Tighter alignment was needed between district and whole-school improvement plans.

A third reason for creating the Unified Student Services Team was to gain tighter alignment between district and individual school goals. As any large urban school system, Boston has a

significant number of non-classroom based support staff working with students who have many needs. Boston has also had the benefit of a large number of partners most notably the Local Education Fund, the Boston Plan for Excellence, the Higher Education Partnership, the Boston Compact, and a large number of community based organizations. Though eager to enter and work in the schools, there had been no systemic standard for how this work would take place, the results expected, and if such work was making a contribution to student results and school improvement. The number of partners involved also varied among schools. Some full-service schools exist within the district, where integrated approaches between educational and support services are being implemented. However, it was evident that the full school service model may not be replicable in every school and, yet, a base-level of service for all Boston students needed to be available. Essentially, a unified model needed to be "brought to scale" (McLaughlin, Henderson, & Rhim, 1998) so that every school could provide an array of services to meet student needs.

The Scope of the Work of the Unified Student Services Team

Guiding Principles

Certain overarching principles served as guideposts as the work of the Unified Student Services Team became defined. Specific actions were outlined to energize each of the principles.

Principle 1 Schools alone can not address all the needs students bring to the classroom door. The district must consider student needs and determine what supports the system can realistically provide to enhance teaching and learning and accelerate student achievement.

Action Identify the realistic scope of services the Team can provide, and collaborate with outside partners to deliver non-IEP-driven services that students need and can not be provided by the schools.

Principle 2 Models of effective practice must be identified for the services which schools can solely provide.

Action Coordinate the work of internal and external providers, other than classroom-based staff, and align that work to support improved teaching and learning for all students.

Principle 3 Services, which can best be provided by community-based organizations and other partners must be aligned and connected to the schools' work.

Action Assess the results of the services provided and their impact on the improvement of student achievement and progress toward narrowing the achievement gap.

From these principles, the commitment emerged that the work of the Unified Student Services Team must reflect alignment with the district's initiatives, support the acceleration of learning, and ensure accountability for results while integrating the important work of community resources as partners in school improvement.

Structure and Leadership

At each Boston school, school-level Student Support Teams serve as the focal point for the discussion of student needs. These teams meet on a regularly scheduled basis chaired by a full-time Student Support Coordinator at the middle and high school levels and a part-time Student Support Coordinator at the elementary level. One of the goals of the Unified Student Services Team is to provide consistency throughout the district as to how Student Support Teams function, how services are matched to student needs, and how data is collected and follow-up and evaluation of services are planned. The key leaders within the Unified Student Services Team, covering the areas of special education, alternative education, physical health, mental health and external partnerships, serve the district centrally as the Student Support Teams serve the schools locally. These leaders, serving as the district-level Unified Student Services Team, determine both the systemic needs through information from the school teams and the services to meet those needs, as well as changes in practice necessary to deliver those services. For services beyond the responsibility of the district, the Unified Student Services Team serves as the catalyst to connect outside agencies and partners to help facilitate their work with BPS students and families. An example of this facilitated work is the current collaboration with the Boston Public Health Commission to assist students in obtaining health insurance.

Defining the Work

To help define the work of the Unified Student Services and capture the ideas and thoughts of those impacted by the work of the Team, an extensive engagement process was undertaken. In a four-month period, meetings were held at nearly half of Boston's Public Schools. They included parents of students with and without disabilities as well as parents of students with bilingual needs. Meetings were also held with other groups representing key constituencies. Individual meetings were held with members of the 10-Point Coalition, a community group focusing on violence prevention efforts, the Black Ministerial Alliance, and other key leaders in the faith community. Higher education partners also participated in the discussions. In total, nearly 600 individuals were asked four key questions:

1. *What do you believe would help your child do better in school this year?*
2. What services are working?
3. *What services are needed?*
4. How should parents come together to promote services needed?

Other data sources included:

- Interviews and surveys with BPS staff which addressed: the types and levels of services at each school; effectiveness of services; and gaps in services;
- Information and data from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health, specifically the collaborative of providers who serve the Boston area through the 125 Behavioral Health Programs in 87 Boston schools;
- Review of current service practices and documents written by each of the departments as well as a review of the literature on school services; and
- Research regarding how other cities have operationalized support services for students, families, and schools.

Strategic Action

To effect the work of the Team in a more coherent way and to support the Superintendent's 1999–2000 district focus of alignment, acceleration, and accountability, the Team's strategic action was organized into four areas: 1) direct services, 2) indirect services, 3) crisis services, and 4) prevention services.

Direct Services affect students in schools and involve both BPS and non-BPS staff as service providers. Though large numbers of students were being served, little or no data had been available on the quality of services. Both internal and external providers expressed frustration in not knowing if these services were helping students reach teaching and learning goals. Along with aligning support services more directly with the teaching and learning agenda, Boston continued to build new service models with public schools specifically for students with disabilities. Historically, a disproportionate number of students with disabilities in Boston have been placed in out-of-district placements largely due to the lack of appropriate programs within the public sector. Since 1998, with new program development initiatives within the district, nearly a 50 percent decrease has occurred in the number of students placed in private placements.

The resources gained from these efforts have been used in two ways. In addition to providing a range of options within the least restrictive environment for students who would have previously been served in more segregated settings, these funds have also supported district programs to assist all students in meeting the promotional standards, such as funding much-needed literacy and math coaches. Other actions taken within the direct service area involved making support services accessible and effective for all students, particularly for students with bilingual needs. Ensuring that culturally competent support staff are available to serve the 9,500 students with bilingual needs, representing Spanish as well as eight other languages within BPS, became a key action step.

In reviewing the status of services throughout the district, prior to adopting the unified model, it was found that an extensive array of counseling services were being conducted in schools. Classroom teachers often shared that they knew little of what occurred during many of the counseling sessions and that there appeared to be little connection to the student's work and behavior within the classroom setting. Explicit collaboration models needed to be formulated between teachers and counseling providers. When a crisis situation arose, schools often requested counseling services from those outside the school, for lack of understanding about what other supports could better assist students. It became clear that schools needed to understand how capacity within their own staffs could be built to provide such services. Moreover, given the number of behavior issues being cited from schools, the need was clear for both school and system capacity to deal with a continuum of supports. The Unified Student Services Team provided resources for several behavior specialists to conduct professional development within targeted schools to assist schools in developing a school-wide approach to behavioral interventions as well as individual behavior plans for students.

Indirect Services involve supports that impact students through changes in the practice of those providing services. Strong professional development and assistance to schools in developing, evaluating, and monitoring partnerships have enhanced support services at the school level. A work group was formed to review and set standards for effective, consistent, and outcome-driven counseling practices throughout the district. Another group, comprised of internal and external providers, was convened to develop a standard memorandum of agreement to be used by schools when they partnered with community mental health agencies. Much of the frustration expressed by both BPS staff and external agencies centered on the lack of communication and understanding between the partners. This agreement provided a framework for standard expectations to be set and agreed-upon practices for both schools and agencies to follow, while still allowing for individual school flexibility to meet the goals outlined in their whole school change plans. To have all outside providers who served BPS students on the same page, an integrated plan was devised to inform and assist outside partners in understanding BPS expectations so that their work could contribute definitively to the teaching and learning agenda. Though a comprehensive data and monitoring system was in place for special education, a consistent data collection process was sorely needed to track the reasons for the need for support services, their delivery, and the outcomes of the services received. A case management approach was identified for particular students in order to "connect" all the services delivered to the student's progress in reaching district benchmarks and meeting promotional standards.

Crisis Services assist schools to cope with students and incidents that unexpectedly impact a school. The Boston Emergency Services Team (BEST) serves schools in this capacity and a generous grant from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health supports the training of school staff to deal with critical incidents within schools. The goals of crisis services are to create a systemic plan to provide both internal and external supports to help schools deal with crises (situations which threaten the physical and mental well-being of students and staff) so that staff competence and confidence in dealing with these incidents could be maximized. Such situations in Boston have ranged from the sudden death of a student to a serious escalator accident involving first graders on a school trip. Protocols for dealing with hospitalized students exist for both schools and physicians to use when a student demonstrates instability as well as for students returning to school from a hospital setting.

Prevention Services help increase staff skills in dealing with a broad range of issues which impact students. Key areas for prevention are identified based on health service data from the Boston Teen Report. This data also helps identify areas that require explicit focus in the classroom. The ways teaching of prevention information could be integrated with citywide learning standards became important for teachers to understand so that such information would be aligned with standards and improve students' achievement. Resources for school-wide prevention efforts have begun to be incorporated into whole school improvement plans.

When new grant opportunities arose and/or outside agencies and foundations approached BPS to become involved with the district's reform efforts, a comprehensive review was conducted to first ensure that the proposed work would be aligned with the district's agenda in supporting teaching and learning. Then a determination was made as to what type of direct, indirect, crisis, or prevention services the new initiative would provide for schools.

Lessons Learned

Several lessons were learned in Boston through the implementation of both organizational and conceptual changes to unify models of service delivery.

Lesson 1: Make sure that special education is working well when a unified model is launched.

The capacity to comply with both federal and state special education regulations must be inarguably evident before a unified system is developed. If compliance has not been maintained, a change to a unified model may be perceived as a way to limit mandated special education services rather than enhance them. Blending general and special education services has always caused anxiety for parents of students with disabilities as they recall the years before federal protection. In 1998, Boston had extricated itself from a long and arduous 20 yearlong court case (Plaintiff Intervenor's Summary Report, 1998). The case was filed in 1978 due to alleged massive non-compliance. A court-supervised process of disengagement took place during the last 15 years. The case ended with the court agreeing that Boston "had demonstrated the capacity to identify and address these problems effectively, through its data management, quality assurance, and internal monitoring system" (Plaintiff Intervenor's Summary Report, 1998). In the same year, the Special Education Director reorganized the department, redefined roles and responsibilities, and set clear and accountable benchmarks for schools to adhere to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate. If special education services were not strong and compliance had not been maintained, the unified model would have been viewed as an attempt to mask special education problems.

Lesson 2: Explicitly state and demonstrate the school district's intent to continue to build capacity to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

In Boston, parents of students with disabilities had worked hard over the years to ensure that their children receive quality services. It was necessary, when the unified model was discussed, to reiterate the joint commitment of the Superintendent and the Director of Special Education that work would continue toward exemplary services for students with disabilities. Educators, parents, and policy makers expected assurances that the expanded view of services for all students would not dilute, in any way, services for students with disabilities. During the course of the reorganization phase, Boston significantly expanded its programs for students with autism, increased both the number of students served and the number of hours of the Extended School Year (ESY) summer program, contracted with an outside consultant to conduct an in-depth evaluation of the district's programs for students with emotional and behavioral needs, and formed a broad-based work group to make recommendations for increasing LRE systemic opportunities. These initiatives provided the evidence to support verbal commitments, added credibility to the vision of unified services, and dispelled fears that special education services would be reduced.

Lesson 3: Talk the reorganization through with all stakeholders.

Though the strategic planning process involved an ambitious community engagement process, it also became clear that the more information was shared about the reorganization, the more the model was understood. Initially, some staff members within the system believed that the change was merely a change in name. From another perspective, some educators had concerns that the reorganization would alter their job responsibilities, or worse, lead to elimination of certain positions. Others felt it reaffirmed what they had been doing all along at the school level—working as a team to deal with many issues that students bring to school. Unified Student Services was discussed in as many forums as possible including school site council meetings, instructional leadership team meetings, and other teacher and parent gatherings. In each forum, examples of district and school goals and the benefits of the unified approach to school services were discussed.

Lesson 4: Engage staff in creating unified models of service delivery at the school level.

At first, there was a great deal of skepticism as to how existing services would be affected in schools. Certain overarching reform themes became the "rallying point" for schools to unify their efforts. Boston's new promotional policy garnered a great deal of public interest in which social promotion would close and students were expected to reach certain benchmarks before moving to the next grade. They, therefore, wanted to know early in the school year if students were at risk of not being promoted and what the consequences would be. Schools had to find ways to ensure effective communication with parents beyond sending notices home in the backpacks. In some schools, Student Support Teams developed a case management approach of reviewing student needs in the context of the promotional policy and gathering support for the student from both within the school and from outside agencies. Students and families heard the "message" from many sources in addition to the classroom teacher. In the 2000 summer transition program, the attendance rate increased to over 80 percent at the elementary level. More work clearly needs to be done at the middle and high school levels with attendance, though a direct correlation can not be made between any one factor, such unified efforts can only help to assist students in understanding what they need to do to get the support to help them achieve high standards. It is important to realize that that each school may develop its own approaches to get results. Central support lies in providing the overall framework and resources to reach the desired results. In Boston, the Unified Student Service guiding principles provide the framework and general expectations for schools. The way the school realigns its resources to meet that challenge is individual, specific to the culture of the school, and determined by the decisions made at the school level.

Lesson 5: Provide a user-friendly document that explains the unified model.

It became clear that a brief written document was needed to explain the organizational and conceptual changes. The original presentation of the model made at a public School Committee was seen as confusing. Too much information was shared and the attempt to make the areas of general and special education fit together made it seem that the changes were merely structural in nature. A strategic plan was needed. This plan began as a 50-page

document filled with tables, charts, and action items. It was streamlined and focused into a four-page document that provided the guiding principles outlined in this paper. This document was disseminated and read widely. Families, staff, and the public at large must understand the general scope of the work of a Unified Student Services Team and the results hoped for through the Team.

Lesson 6: "Talk unified and walk unified."

Throughout Boston, the "unified" message caught on quickly. It was important that key leaders demonstrated the expected practices. It was critical for the Team Leader to be a part of all major system initiatives. When formative assessment benchmarks were being set, the Team Leader reviewed materials to ensure access to them by all students. When the district's accountability system was being revised, assurances had to be made regarding inclusion of all students' scores within school reports and explanations as to the reasons for such a shift. Explanations must move beyond, "It's the law," to the important message sent to students, parents, and staff that all students needed to be "counted" and, therefore, all staff needed to be accountable. When professional development plans were being reviewed, assurances were made that both special education and general education staff members were included in each aspect of the plan. With such assurances, Unified Student Services provided resources to fund literacy coaches and support the work of the literacy models in schools. Previously, such funding had only been designated for students with disabilities. The Superintendent and the Team Leader produced a video together regarding outcomes for all students and the expectations for standards-based teaching in every classroom. This video, shown in every school, became the focal point of a discussion and training session for teachers.

Lesson 7: Make explicit connections between resources and unified support to schools.

When inappropriate referrals to special education declined and funding originally budgeted for out-of-district placements showed a surplus, monetary resources were realigned to provide additional support for schools. At the end of the 1998–1999 school year, a small, but symbolically significant dollar amount was allocated to each elementary school to purchase content area literacy materials to supplement class libraries. Each principal was asked to sign a simple memorandum of understanding ensuring that materials ordered would be used by all students—with and without disabilities. It was made clear that these monies had originally been budgeted for expansion of substantially separate special education classrooms. Every school had decreased its number of referrals to special education. The allocation of the additional funds was available because of the hard work of Student Support Teams at each school promoting more effective pre-referral interventions. At the end of the 1999–2000 school year, it was possible to realign resources again. Due to less expansion than anticipated in substantially separate special education classrooms, five (5) behavior specialist positions were funded. These specialists focus on developing capacity in schools to develop school-wide behavior intervention systems as well as coaching teachers in dealing with individual behavior problems that emerge in their classrooms. Through these

allocations, schools began to believe in a unified system. More focused efforts to serve students within general education has a payoff that benefits all students.

Lesson 8: Be vigilant in reviewing ongoing work through the "lens" of a unified model.

It is important to institute a systematic review process when new initiatives or grant opportunities become available. In the initial months of the formation of the Unified Student Services Team, key administrators were bombarded with proposals to collaborate as well as develop new programs. In an effort to be cooperative and open, the Unified Student Services Team accommodated many partners who had long been ignored. After about eight months, a process was instituted to re-evaluate old and new collaborations and how they supported the strategic plan. The process of re-evaluation was critical to "stay the course" of the strategic plan. As Lisabeth Schorr writes "partnerships and collaborations are not inherently virtuous. They are sometimes a waste of time and a diversion. They must not be allowed to become an end in themselves" (Schorr, 2000). The key leaders within the Unified Student Services Team needed to consistently review the ongoing work and collaborations within schools to ensure alignment.

Future Challenges

The outcome of creating the Unified Student Services Team is that services both within the Boston Public Schools and the larger community will be aligned and coordinated based on the compelling interest of serving all children well. For collaboration between school system and external providers to be more precise and effective, services must be more closely aligned with the needs of students, teachers, and other partners. The literature reflects the challenge of outcome evaluations for support services and partnerships and the danger of tying services to sole indicators such as improved test scores (Brickman, 1999). It is difficult to determine a correlation between a specific intervention and a specific outcome. Formative evaluations must be developed so that progress can be gauged through indicators that show the progress students are making and provide teachers with data to reflect on their own practices. Boston Public Schools is in the process of identifying formative indicators, not only for reading and math progress, but also for services delivered. Increased attendance, more homework help, fewer "time-outs" away from the classroom, and more "on-task" time engaged in learning are examples of the indicators currently being discussed.

Preliminary evidence from the past two years has indicated a substantial decrease in referrals to special education as well as more students being served within the public sector and within general education settings with appropriate supports.

The effectiveness of the Unified Student Services Team will be evaluated by the day-to-day working relationships among district, schools, parents, and the community organizations able to support them. More than separate services, programs, and specific staff practices, reviewing the threads and links between them will provide evidence as to how the parts work with each other and then as a total model. The isolation of those critical services which affect the achievement of teaching and learning goals within individual schools will serve as the next chapter in the journey of Boston Public Schools—how standards-based reform is reflected through a unified system for all students and how this model supports acceleration of achievement for each one of them.

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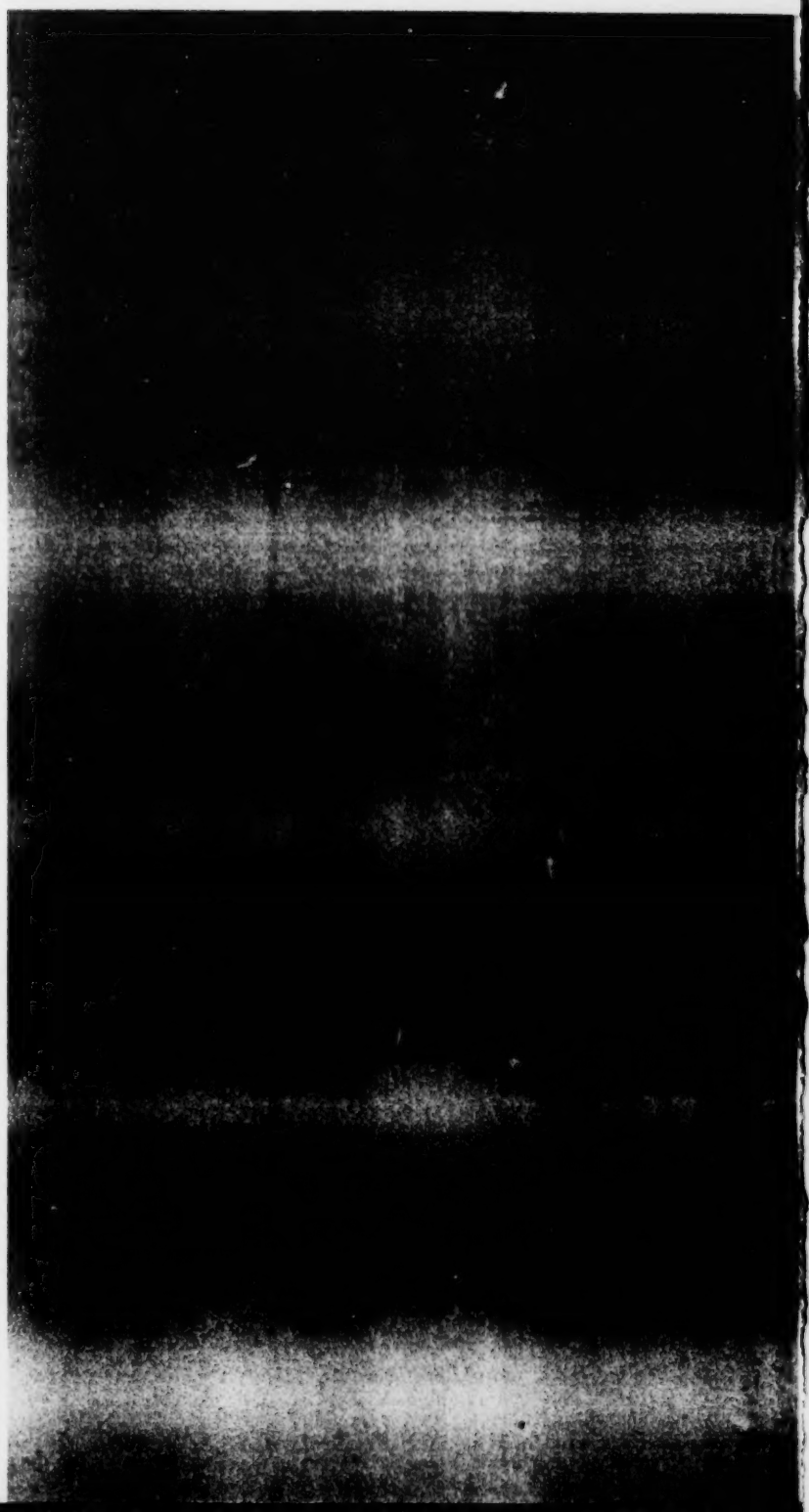

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